

FRANCE WORLD CUP 1998 / First Round

Nantes, Stade de la Beaujoire, June 13, 1998

NIGERIA - SPAIN

3-2

OLISEH'S BOMBSHELL

The 1998 World Cup in France opens with defending World Champion Brazil favored and a long list of possible outsiders including Italy, Argentina, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain, which with Real Madrid is back to win the Champions Cup. The Spaniards' debut looks rather easy because their opponents, Olympic champions Nigeria, are in the midst of a crisis having lost all their pre-World Cup friendlies, so much so that globetrotting coach Bora Milutinovic is risking the bench before the competition even begins. The locker room looks like a powder keg while Clement's Spain is on a winning streak dragged by new phenomenon Raul. And in fact in the first minute Spain is already close to scoring: a long throw by Nadal for young Raul who takes advantage of an erroneous control by Okuchukwu in the area and strikes with his right, but Rufai clears in the dive. In the 6th minute again Raul strikes a free header into the box on Ferrer's cross and the ball hits the crossbar. For Nigeria it looks like a nightmare afternoon but after a bursting start by Spain the Africans grow, Okocha extending a header for Ikpeba who aims at Ivan Campo with repeated feints, gets past him and then shoots at goal, with Zubizarreta rejecting with his fists. But Spain got to the goal in the 21st minute with a free kick by Hierro from the edge of the area, the ball skirting around the barrier and surprising Rufai at his post, thanks to a slight deflection by West. But Nigeria's reaction is admirable and three minutes later it finds the equalizer with a header by Adepoju off Lawal's corner kick, Hierro jumps out of time and the Nigerian midfielder is quick to turn the ball into the net. On the half-hour mark, Spain protests a tripping in the box by Babayaro to Luis Enrique that the referee does not see, but it is Nigeria that has taken over the reins of the match, playing spectacular soccer with a magician-version Okocha who makes the crowd's hands peel with circus-like acts every time he touches the ball, although often an end in themselves. Spain is on the defensive and can no longer break away, but at the beginning of the second half it finds the new lead thanks to a feat by its young leader Raul Gonzales Blanco, 20 years old from the Real Madrid cantera, fresh European champions: Hierro fishes him in the area with a masterful assist and Raul with a half-turn on the volley puts in the net behind Rufai: 2-1. Nigeria now struggles to react and build the game, with Spain covering itself by taking off forward Alfonso and inserting Exteberria, ready to accelerate again with a wild Raul. In the 60th minute Ikpeba gets away from Nadal, who knocks him down as a last man, but the much infamous red card, presented at the start of the World Cup as mandatory for any foul from behind, remains in the pocket of American referee Baharmast and Nadal gets away with a caution. Shortly afterwards Raul has another opportunity in the box, he strikes with first intention, Rufai bungles and the ball slips into the corner. In the 69th minute, old giant Yekini enters in place of fullback Oparaku (great move by coach Milutinovic) and on the first play he breaks through the Spanish defense, opens on the left to Lawal who makes a low cross, Zubizarreta goes awkwardly to the ball and deflects it into his own goal! It's a well-deserved equalizer for the Nigerians. The match becomes spectacular, Raul has another opportunity on Luis Enrique's cross from the right, but he hits it wrong and the ball goes resoundingly out. A minute later there is a corner for Nigeria, Hierro clears it out of the box with a header where Oliseh arrives and from the counter-balance fires a ground-to-air missile of rare beauty that touches the post and inflates the net. It's Nigerian delirium, it's 3-2 and less than a quarter of an hour to go. Spain is in dollops and Nigeria puts on a show, Finidi goes for a cross from the right and Yekini in the center of the area performs a

Acrobatic half-volley that goes over the crossbar: if it had gone in, it would have entered legend! Okocha overdoes the dribbling and Luis Enrique's nerves jump and he kicks him disregarding the ball, but the referee incomprehensibly does not send him off. In the 87th minute Exteberria juggles on the flank and puts in the middle, the ball filters through and Sergi arrives to cross from the back with a placed right-footer that beards the crossbar of the posts. Back-and-forth in the Nigerian area as time expired but the ball did not go in, Nigeria won resoundingly and Spain would not be able to recover from this knockout, drawing zero-nil in the second game against Paraguay: the 6-1 win over Bulgaria in the last match of the group would not be enough for qualification and the Red Furies would have to go home prematurely. Once again the World Cup dream is postponed.

NIGERIA: Rufai 5.5, Oparaku 6 (*from 69' Yekini 7*), Babayaro 6.5, Oliseh 7.5, Okechukwu 6, West 6.5, Finidi 7, Adepoju 7, Ikpeba 6.5 (*from 83' Babangida sv*), Okocha 7, Lawal 6.5 (*from 93' Okpara sv*). All. Bora Milutinovic.

SPAIN: Zubizarreta 4.5, Ferrer 5 (*from 46' Amor 5.5*), Sergi 5.5, Alkorta 5, Ivan Campo 5, Hierro 7, Kiko 5.5, Nadal 5 (*since 76' Celades sv*), Luis Enrique 5.5, Raul 7.5, Alfonso 4.5 (*since 57' Exteberria 6*). All. Javier Clemente.

Referee: Baharmast (USA) 5

On 21' Hierro 0-1; on 24' Adepoju 1-1.

On 47' Raul 1-2; on 71' Lawal 2-2; on 76' Oliseh 3-2.



Sunday Oliseh just pierced Zubizarreta.